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Christian Institutions and the Evangelical Message

Most leaders in missionary circles today would agree that the church is not merely the means for transmitting the Evangelical message, but is actually a part of that message and cannot be separated from it. If this is true, would it not logically follow that Christian institutions, as a part of the church, are also a part of that message?

Someone has likened the church and its institutions to a hand, with the church itself as the palm; and schools, hospitals, and other service institutions as the fingers which give it the means of reaching out to answer the needs of the community, but which also serve to bring the community to the church. Following this analogy, we might say that just as the palm of a hand without the fingers would be deformed and ineffective and not really a hand, so the church is not really the church unless it has some means of reaching out in service as it sees the human suffering and handicaps that interfere with the full realization of God's purpose for men, and that the best means for doing this is through institutions. If we thus consider such institutions as an integral part of the church, they would automatically become a very visible part of the Evangelical message.

This fact can be substantiated as we look at the church-related institutions in Latin America today and in their early beginnings. In some cases, they were started because at the time there was not freedom nor opportunity to begin with a church; and a school seemed to be the opening wedge. There were places where such institutions remained as the only expression of missionary activity for a period of years. As a finger without a hand, they, of course, gave an inadequate interpretation of the message, but because they were there, the church was really there and it is not surprising to know that later the way was opened for organized church work. This is the story of the early presentation of the Evangelical message in Bolivia.

In some cases institutions were started as a preliminary step in the organization of a church and with this specific goal in mind. In fact, there are those who would still follow this procedure. A group of missionaries in Brazil advocate the starting of kindergartens as a means of making contacts in a new community. Cuban pastors in 1957 see the possibilities of starting churches in new suburbs through a combined school and church program.

In other cases, institutions were started by the church on the field to undergird the evangelistic work previously started. They offered an opportunity for creating in the public mind a better understanding of the Evangelical Christian movement. People who know these institutions have come to have a new respect for the church of which they are a part. They have been able to influence public leaders and have helped to mould public opinion on important matters and especially on moral issues. They have thus been instrumental in helping to provide an environment in which the church can grow. In lands where the Roman Catholic church has had control of public educational and medical services, they were started in response to the need for such services for the Evangelical community. Always there was the plan that, through such institutions, future leaders of the church would be discovered, inspired to give their lives to full time Christian service, and trained for that service; and that others would be enlisted as lay workers to strengthen the local church. Thus, in various ways, they have strengthened the Evangelical movement. While their value in these capacities has been recognized by church leaders, the question has sometimes been raised as to whether these results justify the large investment in funds and personnel which are required.

Such institutions have been a part of the Evangelical Christian movement in Latin America since its beginning. In some cases, it might be felt that they exist today just because they were once started for we all know it is much more difficult to close an institution once started than to start a new one. Many times their success has been their embarrassment for they have become so popular that the intimate Christian atmosphere has been sacrificed for numbers and it has not been easy to maintain the high professional or academic standards with the existing equipment and personnel. In some places, secular institutions, both government and private, with more adequate financial backing and political prestige are taking the place of leadership which these institutions once

enjoyed. Serious study on the part of those in charge of such institutions has been begun and must be continued in defining their place and their special contribution today, and new ways must be found for making more effective their Christian witness. With the backing of a stronger Evangelical community, they are now becoming more avowedly Evangelical in their emphasis and are enjoying a closer relationship with the local church.

The institutions referred to in the preceding paragraphs were, for the most part, founded by missionaries as a part of the total missionary program in these countries. By the very nature of the case, they often developed quite separately from the local church down the street or around the corner; though they were considered a part of the larger program of the church in the area. With more adequate buildings and equipment, a better prepared and usually much better paid staff, it was perhaps natural that the relationship between the institution and the local church was often limited to the personal contribution of staff members to the church program or the occasional invitation to the pastor to talk in a chapel service. As has already been mentioned, it is now accepted in most places that there must be a much closer relationship to the local church if the institution is to really be a part of the church and recognized as such. Is it too much to expect that they might become so effective in interpreting the Evangelical message that they would become identified with it in the minds of those who come into contact with them?

Though these institutions have played an important part in the development of the Evangelical church in Latin America and are still most important factors in the total church program, probably of far greater importance is the fact that the church in these countries is today aware of the need for establishing new institutions. Church leaders may be merely following the pattern set by their predecessors, but I prefer to believe that, as they see needs around them, they recognize that as Christians they are committed to do what Christ would do: feed the hungry, heal the sick, befriend the friendless, teach the seeking, and preach the Gospel to all, and that out of this commitment come plans for institutions to meet these needs. So we find that in Colombia seventeen primary schools enrolling 3,000 children are directed by local presbyteries; in Argentina, Methodist city churches are developing a seven day a week program of social outreach into the community

through social centers staffed with volunteers and paid workers; in Brazil, clinics carried on by Brazilians give an opportunity for living and teaching the Gospel in an exceptional way. In Montevideo, Uruguay and Curitiba, Brazil, full fledged hospitals have been planned and built through the united effort of the Evangelical churches of these communities. Staffed by well trained Evangelical Christian doctors of various denominations, they will become a part of the Evangelical message as it is lived and preached in these cities.

It would seem then that Christian institutions are a natural outgrowth of the Christian Church. If we are ready to agree to this, we might wish for some guarantee that such institutions once started would remain Christian! A sore finger not only handicaps the whole hand in its work but may spread poison through its other members and thus make the whole to become diseased. The following list of questions studied periodically and answered in the affirmative might be an attempt to give such a guarantee; though, of course, the spirit is much more important than the law and the complex factor of inter-personal relationships is most important of all though it is difficult to include in the form of a meaningful question.

1. Is the institution a good institution from the professional point of view?

If we have a school and invite parents to send us their children we must insist that our educational methods and the quality of teaching be good - the best we can give. If we have a hospital and invite the sick to use our services, we must insist that the highest professional standards are met, that the best methods of treatment are given under the most hygienic conditions possible. A mediocre or "less than the best that we can give" institution is less than Christian!

2. Is it conducted on Christian principles and directed in accord with the highest Christian ethical standards?

Do those who come to the business office know it is Christian by the way they are treated? Will those who work at the more menial jobs be ready to agree that it is Christian?

3. Has it such a proportion of active Evangelical Christians on its staff as to ensure an effective Christian witness?

This is a difficult test to meet because of the lack of professionally trained people among the very small minority of Evangelical

Christians, but one might well question the wisdom of starting any institution today unless this standard can be met.

4. Is it the means of leading some staff, students, or others to a commitment of their lives to Christ, not only as an ideal or as a model, but as Lord and Saviour?

5. Does it give training for Christian responsibility and service in the church and community and an opportunity for such service through its relationship to the local church? Is it instrumental in recruiting dedicated young people for full time Christian Service?

6. Does the church take some responsibility for it and share in its management? If it is to be a part of the church, this seems self evident, yet it is often overlooked as institutions are organized. As was stated in the report that came out of the Willingen Conference of the International Missionary Council in 1952:

> "The problem of institutions is fundamentally a spiritual one. Technical and organizational matters cannot be treated as unimportant, but the level of spiritual life in an institution matters even more. To make an institution more effective is thus a question of making more Christian the service of its staff, the personal relations of its members, and the corporate worship and witness of its day-to-day life."

In his letter to the church in Corinth (I Cor. 12:4), Paul speaks of a variety of gifts, but the same Spirit, and a variety of service; but the same Lord, and varieties of working; but the same God who inspires them all in everyone. Perhaps the fact that there are many ways of service and many media for working is not as important as is the fact that it is the same Spirit, the same Lord who inspires them all and the same God who is being proclaimed by them. Institutions conducted by individual Christians or by a community of believers for reasons of personal gain or group prestige may be good institutions but if this is their reason for being, they are surely less than Christian. Founding institutions and continuing them for the purpose of giving an opportunity for service to Christians with special professional ability and training might be considered by some to be justifiable reason for such institutions, but if that is their prime reason for being then they are really less than Christian. Institutions through which the needs of the community are being met and whose programs and activities are

constantly restudied in the light of these needs would certainly be considered by many as Christian, yet if this is their only reason for being, they are not very different from many secular institutions and are really less than Christian. It is only as those related to an institution recognize the Lordship of Christ and proclaim Him as Lord through obedience to Him, with the conviction that it is God who has inspired its establishing and its continuing, that the institution is really Christian. There is something solid about such an institution. Its very buildings are witness to the fact that here is something different. God speaks through every phase of its program. It cannot help but be recognized as a part of the Evangelical message.

Such institutions will be a part of the Evangelical church wherever there are Christians aware of the needs of people and sensitive to the leading of the Holy Spirit. Without them the church would be less than the church and the Evangelical message would be incomplete.